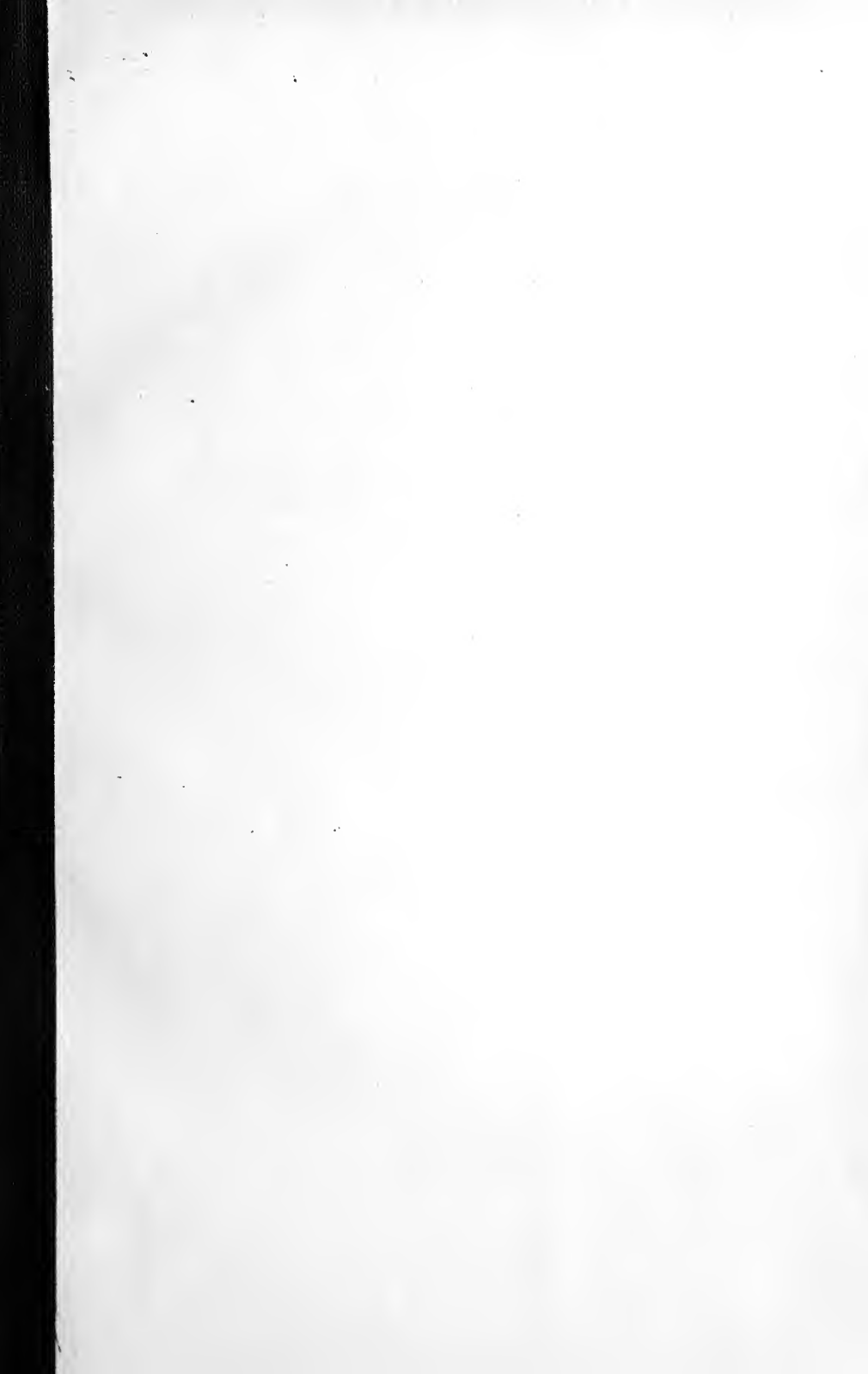


LE.H
F941i

[Frothingham, O.B.]
The interviewer.





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THE INTERVIEWER

by

O.B.Frothingham

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[Excerpt from the Forum,

April, 1886]



LE. H.
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Journal

[Frothingham, O. B.]

THE INTERVIEWER.

THE duties of the newspaper, especially in a country like ours, where the people are interested in each other, and want to know everything that goes forward, are many, various, and difficult. There is necessary a careful summary of facts; then a comment on the facts; next, a classification of the facts in order to show their relation to other groups of events; and finally, an analysis of the motives, feelings, ideas, that work in distinguished individuals to create history. There must, therefore, be the observer, the interpreter, the philosopher, and the psychologist. All need to be capable, industrious, keen-sighted men, skillful with the pen, thoughtful, discerning; but it is evident that the last must be the most penetrating of all, for the task that he undertakes is the most arduous, and requires the highest qualifications. He who would look into the heart ought to be sagacious, truthful, sincere. He should be an excellent writer, able to express shades of thought in exact language; he should be possessed of the power to distinguish between passing moods and permanent dispositions of mind; he should have some knowledge of temperaments and some gift at reading spirits; and he should be absolutely simple, free from personal conceit, veracious. None but a person of the highest order can meet these requirements. It is manifest that the ordinary interviewer does not. There is no apparent sign that he has any just conception of his function; no indication of a desire on his part to obtain such a conception. He must be a fair writer, otherwise his performance would not find its way into print. He must be bright, spicy, alert, else his essay would not be read. There is no market for dullness. But into the deeper recesses of his calling he does not and is not invited to go.

Is not invited, I say. There is no general demand for nicety or profundity. The public taste is not cultivated to that extent,

and the reporter gives only what is desired. The demand for the comical, the rage for sensation, the craving for immediate effects, the passion for personalities, the love of surprises, the delight in novelties, the appetite for gossip, leading to the actual subordination of servants and the intrusion into kitchens and stables for items, effectually prohibit useful information about minds and hearts. It is simply impossible to give a serious account of character to a gaping assembly. Even if the talent were there it would have to be suppressed, or exercised without popular notice. The public appreciate by this time close and accurate observation. They are beginning to value at its worth editorial comment. The importance of philosophical generalization is dimly seen. But there is no call for the analysis of intellectual processes, and every attempt at a real knowledge of men is discouraged.

Why then, it may be urged, is not the public educated up to this elevated standard, and rendered sensitive to fine influences? Ah! why, indeed? Such a process requires time, and is to be accomplished only by those who work on long lines, and not for momentary results; by the poets, essayists, novelists, men of letters, artists, and the whole class of instructors. This task does not belong to the interviewer, who is obliged to make a living, find a ready sale for his wares, and must take things as they are. It is not his duty to improve the public but to gratify it. He is a servant, not a mentor. He exists from day to day, and must be always ready on demand. He cannot wait for the world to become more refined than it is. The course of evolution is too slow for him. When men ask for better things and will pay for them they shall have them.

This explains the interviewer's method, and accounts for his chief imperfections. The people he deems worthy are conspicuous for the moment, people on whom the public eye is fixed, or who can be made to produce a sensation—actors and actresses, singers, eminent lecturers, "sensational" preachers, mountebanks, strangers of distinction from foreign climes, popular speakers, celebrities of whatever class, about whom stories are or may be told. And the subjects are such as lie on the surface—the day's experience, the haps and mishaps of a season, the incidents of a journey, the adventures of a voyage. "What did you do at

such a time?" "How did you feel at such a crisis?" "What did so and so say?" "What is your opinion of mankind in general?" "Do you like German opera?" "What sort of a passage did you have across the Atlantic Ocean?" "Do you enjoy America?" "Do you expect to have a good time?" Quite in the style of an old phrase book. Both questions and answers are insignificant, of no value and of no use. The press is filled with personalities of no importance to anybody. The merest charlatans are raised to a temporary eminence, and the veriest twaddle is thrown abroad as if it was wisdom. If deeper waters are ventured into, nothing is preserved but what is entertaining. Amusement, at any rate, must be furnished. A fillip must be given to the sensibilities. Excitement of a kind most called for is indispensable. The consequence is that words are distorted, impressions are falsified, statements are overlooked, thrown out of proportion, in order to produce the wished-for effect; if necessary, an entirely wrong notion is started, and the individual is ground into paint for the entertainment of people who read as they run. Instances are numerous where an entirely different account has been given from that which a just report would have allowed; but then a just report would not have been entertaining. If one who was opposed to Mormonism, for example, can be represented as a favorer of the system of polygamy; if a prominent Conservative can be made to appear as a Radical, or a leading Radical can be made to pose as a Conservative; if a conspicuous Republican can be passed off as a Democrat, or an influential Democrat can be changed into a Republican, the soul of the average interviewer jumps for joy. If the person so dealt with is, or is supposed to be, a man of some importance, the sport is the greater. The power of the interviewer is sometimes, in such cases, immense, so that it is no wonder he is dreaded by delicately organized men.

To give an illustration drawn from personal experience. For many years I was an Independent preacher in New York, a preacher of pure, spiritual Theism, quite unsympathetic with "Christian" institutions and doctrines under every form of interpretation, even the most liberal; in fact, finding fault with them from the historical, the critical, the scientific, the philo-

sophical points of view. There was nothing peculiarly striking about my attitude or my performance. Certainly my Sunday addresses were not popular in the usual sense, that is, they did not draw the multitude; nor were they in the smallest degree "sensational," either as to subject or treatment. There was no attempt at eccentricity. It is needless to say there was no genius or wit, or coruscation of brilliancy. The papers, and possibly my interest in the Free Religious Association, alone drew outside attention toward me. My congregations were composed of quiet, sober people of different Christian sects, and of no sect at all, seekers after knowledge, philanthropists, humanitarians, reformers, lovers of intellectual freedom, philosophers, literary men, artists, men and women who came for light and for liberty. The organization was perfectly harmless, and was kept as simple, sincere and honest as possible. It was, indeed, as far from "demonstrative" as such a thing could be. Many people were attracted to the services by the absence of pretence. The preacher was on pleasant terms, personally, with men of opposite extremes of opinion on speculative matters, with Catholics on one hand and materialists on the other.

After a time, having said my say, and done all that was practicable then in the direction of "radical" thought, having reached the end of my tether, and seeing nothing in the shape of organization before me, I resigned and went to Europe. There everything seemed orderly, regulated, subdued. The ferment of speculation was not intrusive. The feverishness of the mind was not thrust upon the traveler. An aspect of content was presented. A placid, uninquiring spirit of belief was spread over the surface of society, and the surface of society is all the passing observer has opportunity to notice. Time was allowed for repose, for recreation. Men and women did their work—often hard, repulsive work—patiently, cheerfully, as if they were used to it, and were without covetousness, or envy, or unsatisfied ambition. They were not perpetually looking over the fence to observe what their neighbors were doing. The greed for money, or place, or "influence" of some sort was unawakened, so that, for the moment, the sentiment of peacefulness overcame every other, and it seemed as if the one thing needful in this short life was acquies-

cence; as if a stable condition of society was better than a fluctuating one like ours. At last the feeling was engendered that a fixed order was favorable to such acquiescence. This was a feeling merely, not an intellectual conviction, by any means. The tired man was dreaming.

Then Radicalism as I saw it in Europe was coarse, vulgar and violent. It swaggered and strutted, and wore its cap on one side of its head; it swore, and smoked in the streets, and blasphemed, and denounced all law and orderly arrangement of society. On the other hand, law was more merciful than I expected to find it; government was less absolute, more gracious, generous, humane. The charities of the Church affected me; the meekness of its ministers, the gentle submissiveness of its working clergy, the absence of dogma, the picturesque character of its symbols and sacraments. The calm, unswerving steadiness of its administration was fascinating to the imagination; its indifference to dissent, its consciousness of power, its silence when questions were put, its stillness and confidence, so unlike the mental turmoil I was used to. No special study was instituted. No investigations were set on foot. No doctrines were examined. No authorities were consulted. The critical intellect was not awake. The sense of irresponsibleness that accompanied all my steps through Europe lent itself to a complete absence of all aggressive faculty. It was a night vision.

On my return home, nothing occurred to disturb the impression. A private, secluded life had no provocation to conflict or struggle. The mind was turned away from theological questions. The warfare of sects was unheard. The general contest for pre-eminence went on as in another sphere. Among the letters that came to me was one from a man totally unknown to my acquaintance—an innocent-looking letter, asking an interview. There was nothing surprising in this, for I had often received similar notes from strangers. The man came, as any gentleman might, without paper or pencil, or that eager, inquisitive look which characterizes the common reporter. There was no air of curiosity—no questioning or cross-questioning. The talk was frank and free; on my own part ingenuous and unstudied. It never occurred to me that my agreeable visitor was a reporter till

the instant of his leaving the room. Then a suspicion flashed across me, and I asked him if he wrote not to say anything that might compromise me. His assurance that he did not mean to—an assurance which I presume he kept according to his understanding of it—satisfied me, and when nothing appeared for several days, my fears were allayed.

Suddenly the letter came out in a prominent paper, and such was the skill with which it was written, such the easy flow of the narrative, such the adroitness and deftness of the composition, that it was copied and went through the country. The account was most ingeniously contrived to cause a sensation. Occasion was taken to bring radicalism into disrepute in an orthodox community. The tale was too plausible to be answered except by a more elaborate statement than I was inclined or able to make at the moment. It was in a measure true, yet it was not true. It was true, inasmuch as I was still, sentimentally, under the spell of European travel, and was disposed to lay more emphasis than I had previously done on the theistic aspect of my old creed, as well as the spiritual origin of fundamental symbols and beliefs. It was untrue, inasmuch as my intellectual position remained unchanged. My questions were unanswered, my critical doubts were unremoved. My attitude toward institutions and creeds was unaltered. I still discarded everything like orthodox Protestantism, everything like sacerdotalism, everything that was commonly called Christianity. In a word, the idea that I had gone into another camp—an idea that was generally entertained on the strength of the letter that has been referred to—was as much news to me as to anybody. I still respected and loved my old comrades, still held by my old views in regard to the Bible, Jesus, the details of belief, the efficacy of rites, and was naturally a good deal provoked by the misrepresentation.

Soon the results were manifested. Letters arrived, of congratulation, condolence, abuse. Newspapers were sent me, pamphlets, volumes. Church doors flew open to receive me—Romanist, Calvinistic, Swedenborgian. The Shakers made overtures, the Presbyterians, the "Evangelicals." I was made the subject of sermons, was preached about, prayed about, scolded, praised, bewailed, commended. The din became so intolerable, the per-

secution so violent, that I was obliged to leave word, as I took refuge in a neighboring house, that my whereabouts should not be divulged. And I could not help thinking that if I, a private individual, suffered so much, it was not surprising if more important men, more severely afflicted, got angry, and were even tempted to become profane. In such cases it must be as when a mouse sets a house on fire by nibbling a match, or a sportive kitten overturns a precious vase. Last winter, a lecturer amused an audience by describing his adventure with a bell, the tone whereof he wished to hear; but it hung in a high belfry, was never sounded except as an alarum in case of an invasion, or a conflagration in the city, and, in consequence, was carefully guarded. By some ingenuity he reached it, and could not resist the temptation to test its quality. He struck the bell, but, frightened by his temerity, descended, took flight through a back door, got away safely, and, looking back, saw the pale citizens running to learn what the matter was. Such a commotion may an interviewer cause, who is mindful of his own reward in money or fame, but does not sufficiently think of the consequences of his action, or is not well enough acquainted with the difficulties of his subject to divide truth from error.

Nevertheless, in spite of occasional obtuseness, incidental mistake, and a little obliquity of vision, the office of an interviewer is important. He draws forth to the light subtle, hidden, or dark thoughts, and often obliges a man to overhaul his own mind, and define his private opinions. Many a victim ought to return blessing for cursing, when he considers the service done him in the way of exact though painful thinking, of sincere self-examination, of close scrutiny of sentiments, of honest estimate of motives. In our communities nothing essential ought to be concealed. The secret cogitations of leading men should, in so far as they concern the public, be known. Matters of consequence are sometimes held back from indolence or shyness or fear; and the interviewer acts as a kind of public conscience, supplementing private thinking. This is worth a good deal of rasping misconception and individual discomfort. Really, no one regrets the misconception and suffering more than the interviewer himself who is the innocent cause of it. He does his

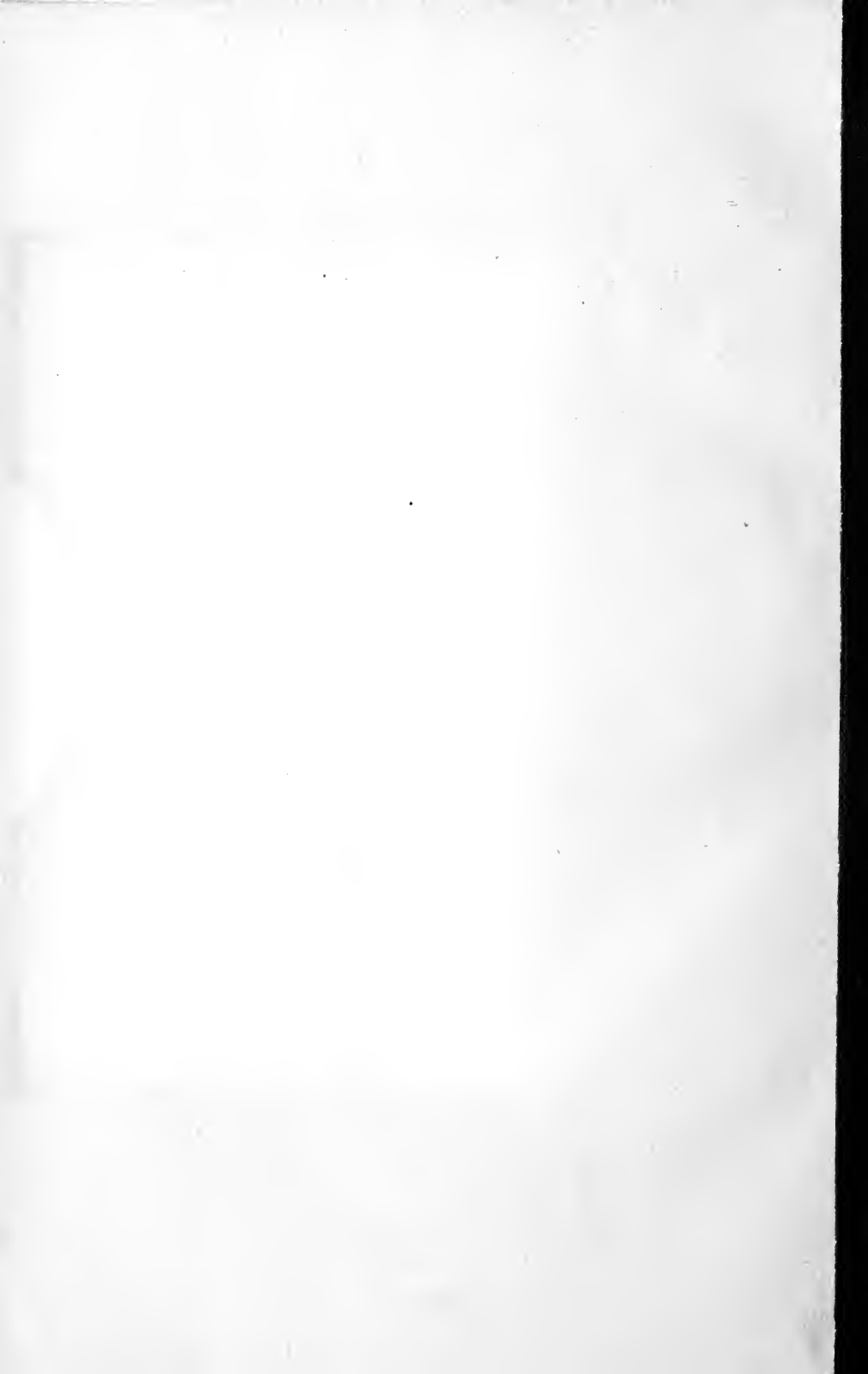
best, and will be glad when his best can be made better. At least the higher order of interviewers will be; the others may be ranked with the rest of our social nuisances. The intrusiveness is a slight evil, after all. The inquisitiveness raises a smile as often as a malediction. The tenacity is amusing as frequently as it is exasperating. One can always refuse to say anything; but this is ungracious, and may be churlish. The nobler the spirit in which the reporter is met, the more substantial will be the justice he renders. His task, when conscientiously regarded, is an arduous one, needing encouragement rather than blame.

Foreigners are shocked at our system of interviewing, as they would naturally be, not being democratic. The French are a democratic people, but their government is aristocratic, and demands an engrossing attention. The English are essentially aristocratic, and although their government is popular, they cherish their individuality, and resent intrusion. The Englishman's house is his castle, the American's is the place where he permanently stays. We have no castles. The latch-string hangs out. The American lives out of doors. If he does not like it, he must learn to, for it is his privilege, and he should endeavor to give it welcome, bearing its burdens while grateful for its advantages.

O. B. FROTHINGHAM.

Foran
April 1886





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LE.H [Frothingham, C.B.]
F24J1 The interviewer.

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